CREATIVE CHANGE IN PUBLIC PROGRAMS

Bernie James has made my presentation here more difficult than I had bargained for by asking permission to reprint some remarks I made a few months ago to the Washington Chapter of the American Society for Public Administration on change and political executives. Without knowing whether he has put copies of those remarks in your hands, it is impossible for me to give you that same speech without fear of boring you with something you have already read. I will, however, repeat some of the ideas of that earlier talk because of the inevitable role which political officers in a bureaucracy play in the process of change in public programs and policies.
What I want to do this evening is discuss a number of so-called principles of administration and test, if I can, their general reliability against my own recent experience, which has included several years' work with Idaho's Senator Church on Capitol Hill, followed by four years as Assistant Secretary for Public Land Management in Interior and now the second half of my first year as Under Secretary of the Interior.

Change in public policy is sometimes an elusive concept. When major new programs are enacted by the Congress--such as the Peace Corps or the War Against Poverty--it is relatively easy to see the changes which new legislation brings. The changes brought about by the passing of presidential power from one president to another can be far less visible, though if the change also represents a shift of power from one political party to
another, the impact may have much of the same visibility as that typical when new laws are put on the books.

When public administrators think about change there is an assumption that we are always talking about change as a Good Thing. It might be fruitful to explore change in its negative dimension, because it is not axiomatic that all changes or pressures for change are Good Things. The thing most administrators are striving for, however, is the creation of institutions and systems by which the bureaucracy can favorably react and carry out "good" changes exerted from outside the bureaucracy, while at the same time maintain both institutions and a "climate" within the organization so that healthy change can be generated and executed from within.

The science of public administration has ample principles covering various ways in which change can be
either assured or promoted.

One of these principles asserts that you can't teach old bureaucracies new tricks. If you have a new program, create a new agency to get it under way. The 1930's and 40's have a number of examples of agencies set up to do jobs which, it was assumed, older bureaucracies were either unable or unwilling to do, or do properly. The Farm Security Administration, the AAA, and the Securities and Exchange Commission are among the more obvious examples.

There are also some recent case histories that fit this principle including the Peace Corps and the Office of Economic Opportunity.

There are some differences between these last two, however, that should be pointed out, because the differences are indicative of some of the troubles inherent in the basic principle.
The Peace Corps was branded new.

child of then Senator Humphrey, and brought

tative reality by President Kennedy, it transgressed

existing agency or program. When it was organized it

was set apart from the existing structure of foreign

policy and international aid operations where its success-

ful history has certainly proved that the organizational
decisions, at any rate, were not wrong.

The War on Poverty was different. Though the

emphasis was new and a new kind of magnifying and

focusing dimension was added, much of the War on

Poverty already existed or, as was true of the Job Corps,
had existed in one form or another in the past.

The new program stepped rather boldly on existing

bureaucratic toes, and it could have transgressed

violently numerous existing agencies and programs. In

this case, also, a new agency was created to offer the
leadership within the Executive Department thought necessary to bring to bear on the problem of poverty the full resources of the Federal Government. It is interesting to note that the farmers of the War on Poverty originally thought the new leadership could be handled by a small staff of coordinators "in the low hundreds." This optimistic prediction has not panned out as the poverty warriors concluded it was very difficult to utilize the resources of old bureaucracies—or perhaps history will show that the predictions of a small staff didn't pan out because the new organization didn't make adequate use of the existing bureaucracy—or, to cite a third possibility, perhaps the hypothesis of effecting change by a new organization was less right than suspected.

I don't pretend to have any answers to these questions and the history by which they can be judged is far from complete. I hope, however, someone will do an
administrative history of both the Peace Corps and the War on Poverty; both could shed considerable light on the validity of a number of assumptions in the field of public administration.

But if some people have argued the answer to creative change is a new organization, others have asserted with considerable force that the problem of change is largely a matter of leadership. Stated another way, this administration principle proclaims that bureaucracies are fundamentally capable of just about anything if they have the right leadership at the right time.

There is a corollary principle to the effect that political leadership doesn't really matter at all and the real question is the caliber of the top echelons at the career level and the institutional arrangements by
which they can operate. The second of these arguments is not at all unrelated to a number of assumptions about nonpartisan local government we have made in the United States to the effect that the real questions of local government are not politically partisan, only "right" or "wrong."

The expression to the effect that there is no such thing as a Democratic or a Republican way to clean a street is attributed to Fiorella La Guardia and has recently been made a part of the political platform of a somewhat mixed-up slate of candidates running for the mayorality of New York. Though it is a temptation to become sidetracked on the issue of whether there is a right and a wrong way to run a city or any other instrumentality of government, my experience leaves me generally unable to appreciate assertions which treat any aspect of administration in such black-and-white, right-or-wrong,
all-or-nothing terms.

The role of leadership in an organization focuses at the heart of the problem of change. In my judgment, because my experience tells me that the institutional arrangements and the patterns by which organizational charts are drawn up are less important in the long run than administrative leadership.

While the distinction between a political executive and a career executive is often a useful one, I am no longer as sure as I once thought I was about the real differences between the two, either in what they do or how their performance is measured.

If the distinctions I felt existed in 1961 in fact exist now, they are much blurred. For some period after a change of administration involving a different party taking the Presidency, there is some kind of cohesion among the political appointees. But they are soon caught
up in the loyalties of their bureaus and agencies. Some of our bureau chiefs are political, some career—I would defy you to identify the differences. The political appointees can be fully as bureaucratic as the career people, and they can also be fully as professional. It all depends on which adjective you choose.

President Johnson has blurred the distinction in important ways by opening the doors of the highest positions in Government to career people. More than that, he has tendered an even more meaningful accolade, I think, by his own uncompromising insistence on quality performance from both the career executive and the political executive. There is no double standard. That means a lot to the morale of both groups.

The distinction between political and career offices has changed dramatically in the last decade. A former Under Secretary of the Interior recorded these thoughts
as he focused on the distinction between his own role and that of the rest of the people in the Department.

"We have a complete staff of planners--I believe they call themselves a 'Program Staff'."

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"All of that is going to be abolished tomorrow. The tragedy of it is that in eliminating an office like that we only push the top people down one or two grades and reduce their salary. They in turn bump others all along the line and finally I guess we lose the elevator operators or the switchboard operators--somebody at the bottom. The net result is that everybody is unhappy. But that is the working of the Civil Service system and we can do nothing about it."

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"We want to get into it [a certain policy matter]..."
ourselves and not trust it to some of the subordinates because they only confuse the issue and will not carry out the kind of thinking we believe is necessary."

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"We are really having trouble trying to get certain key positions exempt from Civil Service so that we can make some of our appointments. Not long ago we requested the exemption of some 382 people out of 58,000 from protected Civil Service positions. So far we have received approval of just 20... and at the rate we are going now, we may ultimately have a total of about twenty-five or thirty! That is simply an impossible position because if you cannot bring in more of your own kind, you cannot do a job."

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"I am still having a running fight with the Civil Service Commission, or rather with the Chairman of the Commission, on the theory that we ought to be able to place more people of our own selection. He insists that we cannot possibly have 375 or 380 people in the Department who are high policy making people. He finally did agree with me that if the people I have in mind do not make policy they certainly can wreck policy."

Under a President who has given thirty some years of his life to public service, it is today unfashionable to speak longingly of going back to private industry.

Where then is the conflict, or is there one? I grope for the right word, and can come up with one that is inadequate—to me what we all ought to be fighting for is to keep the system "worthy." Dictators have demonstrated what hierarchy and control can accomplish when
marshalled for unworthy purposes.

The bureaucracy can do anything. It has to be managed and led by people who have a sense of public morality worthy of the immense power which is there for both good and ill.

Our title speaks of effecting change. Is there something about the structure of Government, related or unrelated to career or political executives, which is inimical to change?

Arthur Schlesinger, speaking of the effect President Kennedy had on people, "of forcing them to fresh approaches--exciting them because of his great interest and his own brilliance, and forcing them to a higher, more imaginative performance than the bureaucracy would ordinarily produce or tolerate" suggests that bureaucracy resists change, and that it scarcely tolerates, much less produces, imaginative performance.
I do not agree with the implication. The bureaucracy, of course, responds to inspired leadership; but it also carries on and delivers for mediocre leadership, bad leadership, or no leadership.

Furthermore, the function of at least part of the bureaucracy is to deliver creativity and innovative activity for its own sake; and it does so most creditably in a variety of fields. I have heard the President speak most eloquently of the responsibility of the Government structure to feed ideas upward, including up to him.

Is it the tendency of bureaucracy to stifle change? In my own Department, the evidence points the other way most dramatically. The Department has in my opinion responded brilliantly to the inspiration and leadership of a gifted and able Secretary, and has itself basked in the glow of satisfaction as it has seen its own corporate aspirations realized. It has seen itself become a national
rather than a regional Department, for one example; it has seen itself recognized in reputation if not in name as a Department of Conservation.

As you can see, I am inclined to the view that organizational arrangements by which bureaucracies operate are less important than the leadership which operates them—at both the career and political levels.

What does this mean, then, for administrators who want to develop optimum conditions for creative change?

First, I think administrators must stifle the inevitable first reaction to "create a new office" or "hire a new man" or "enlarge a staff." They must also resist the temptation to analyze the problem by scrutinizing organizational charts and functional descriptions.

Second, administrators should take a long healthy look at the quality of their own leadership and that of
the people to whom they look for innovation and program execution. Criteria for leadership are elusive, and I know of no formula that guarantees success.

We might say the test is whether the leader runs the system, or the system runs him. Or we might say, as I did in a famous "secret" speech to the Park Superintendents, that loyalty to a Bureau should not transcend loyalty to a Department and to an Administration.

Whether career or political, our leaders must believe in our system of Government, however corny that may sound to some. Both politics and hierarchy—the bureaucratic structure for getting things done—are devices for assuring accountability to the public as a whole.

Stephen Bailey, in an essay for a memorial volume to Paul Appleby, observes that the normative model for a public servant involves the same qualities in public
servants in every branch and at every level of
Government--judges and legislators, as well as executives
and administrators, staff as well as line officers,
technicians as well as generalists.

Use and wont, precedent, the way things have
always been done will never substitute for social theory.
if public servants have the mental attitudes and moral
qualities which are derived from Paul Appleby's
writings, synthesized by his successor.

The three essential mental attitudes are:
(1) a recognition of the moral ambiguity of all men and
of all public policies; (2) a recognition of the contextual
forces which condition moral priorities in the public
service; (3) a recognition of the paradoxes of procedures.
A public servant who cannot recognize the paradoxes
of procedures will be trapped by them. (Examples in
Interior.)
The three moral qualities start with optimism. This optimism must reject fatalistic attitudes about where bureaucracy is going. It must see the administrative structure as responsive, or capable of being responsive; as creative or capable of being so; and above all as worthy, or capable of being so.

It is worthy for everyone is this room, probably. Of all governmental roles, says Bailey, the administrative role is procedurally the most flexible. Without optimism on the part of public servants, the political function of creative response to the gross discomforts of mankind are incapable of being performed.

The other moral qualities are courage, and fairness tempered by charity.

These attributes distinguish among those placed in authority. Personal and public life are so shot through with ambiguities and paradoxes that timidity
and withdrawal are quite natural and normal responses for those confronted with them.

One area for consistent courage in the public service is in the relationship of general administrators to experts—it takes as much courage to face down minority expert opinion as to face down the majority opinion of a clamoring crowd. And then, too, there is the poignant discussion of the necessity of a courage to decide.

I could go on, but it is time to summarize.

Creative change in the public programs and policies of a democracy is not inevitable. Both public and private enterprises have many examples of organizations that have died because they could not or did not change when they should have. But while change is not inevitable it is necessary and when organizations fail to respond to change they can expect to be bypassed, ignored, or
trampled under foot. Unfortunately, one of the fates they do not often suffer is abolition—a deficiency President Johnson may well remedy.

I find the process of change at the heart of the challenge of public service because the degree to which change is successfully carried out is almost the only measure we have of successful governance.

You at this Institute will have a major role in present and future change. I hope you will find it exciting, too.

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